USA WEEKEND

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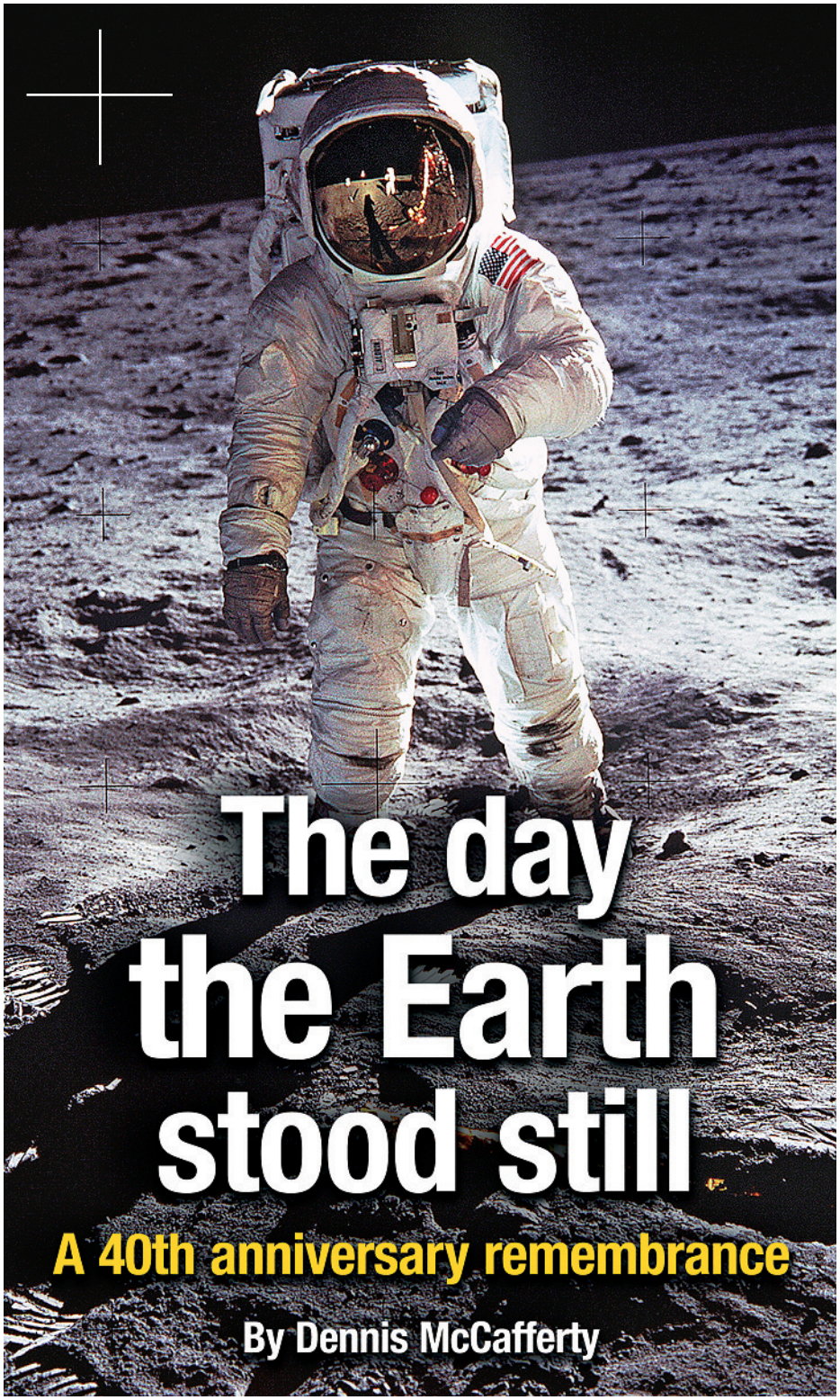
40th Anniversary

Where were you?

Moon-landing memories from Neil Armstrong

Sen. John McCain
Sally Ride
Kareem Abdul-Jabbar
Bob Schieffer
Neil deGrasse Tyson



The day the Earth stood still

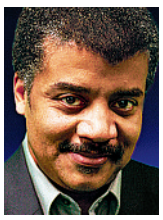
A 40th anniversary remembrance

By Dennis McCafferty

July 20, 1969: What a day for America — and the world. With one step on a powdery chunk of lunar surface, we achieved the unachievable: Apollo 11 landed on the moon. Few events have had the same impact on our times, according to these five distinguished Americans.

Neil deGrasse Tyson: Afterward, anything seemed possible.

I watched the moon landing when I was 10 years old with a friend, on a 12-inch black-and-white TV — with a coat hanger for an antenna ear. Then, the next year, that same friend handed me a pair of binoculars, and I looked at the moon, seemingly for the first time in my life. It no longer was a distant object. I had never noticed before how full of valleys and hills it was.



Tyson hosts PBS' *NOVA scienceNOW*.

The Apollo missions were great adventures; every one went a bit farther than the one before. With Apollo 7, we circled the Earth. With Apollo 8, we flew around the moon and saw some of our very first images of the Earth. What a picture! We saw our planet as all land and water and clouds — not color-coded countries and states. After Apollo 11, anything seemed possible. A mission to Mars by 1980? Why not?!

But that didn't happen. The missions ended with Apollo 17 in 1972. So did the sense of adventure. Today, we celebrate this era because, frankly, it's dead and on display at a museum near you. By now, I had hoped we'd be celebrating all of the bigger and better explorations we might have achieved *after* the day we landed on the moon.

Sen. John McCain: In Hanoi, it gave me hope.

I didn't find out about the moon landing until a year and a half after it happened. When I was in solitary confinement in North Vietnam, they always played propaganda on a loudspeaker. One day, someone on there was giving a speech about war and said something to the effect of, "America can put a man on the moon, but it can't stop its war upon us." It was just meant as an aside, but we prisoners were all astonished. More U.S. prisoners were captured and brought in after the moon landing, and we wanted to know all about the event. We weren't allowed to talk to each other, however, so we communicated using a "tapping" code on the prison

McCain was a POW from 1967 to 1973.

Photo of Buzz Aldrin on cover and above, taken by Neil Armstrong: NASA
Cover photo illustration by Leon Lawrence III for USA WEEKEND

walls. Because we were aviators, we were exhilarated by all of the details about Neil Armstrong's first step. During a time that challenged my fellow prisoners and me, our spirits were boosted by the optimism of unlimited possibilities.

Bob Schieffer: America jumped to No. 1 again.

Schieffer is host of *Face the Nation*.

CBS had a motto back in those days: "If NBC sends one camera crew to a story, we'll send two. If they send two, we'll send four." So we sent hundreds of reporters to cover this. People forget that there was real fear among Americans that we were falling behind in the technological race. In 1957, the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, a satellite, into space. Then, in 1961, the Soviets launched the first manned spaceflight. We honestly believed — given the seriousness of the Cold War — that they were building the capability to attack us from space. We felt that America had lost its edge.

Then, the moon landing changed everything. When it first happened, Walter Cronkite rubbed his hands together with glee and said on the broadcast, "Oh boy!" It reflected the joy of an entire nation. We were back to where we all thought we should be: No. 1.

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar: People grabbed their telescopes to see it.

I was in Port-of-Spain in Trinidad and Tobago visiting my extended family for the first time in my life. I had graduated from UCLA and was just about to start my career in the NBA. I finally had the time and the money to go there and meet some of my family members.

The people of Trinidad were absolutely fascinated by the moon landing, talking about it all the time as the big moment was approaching. All of us wanted to watch it, but there were no TVs! So the people took out telescopes and looked at the moon that night. No one could actually see anything, but I'll never forget how full and bright the moon looked that night — how much of a sense of accomplishment you felt by looking at it.

Abdul-Jabbar: top scorer in NBA history

Sally Ride: I found a hero that day.

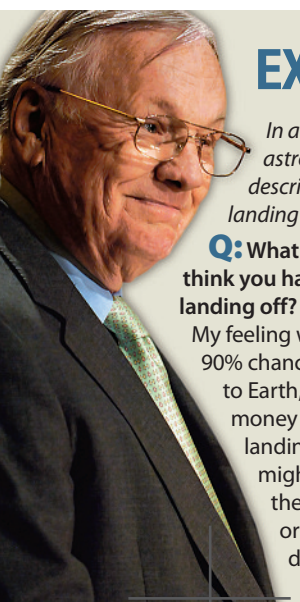
As the moon landing approached, I knew I was going to do either one of two things with my life: become a scientist or a professional tennis player.

I was playing in a national junior tennis tournament that day. I convinced other players to watch the landing. When Armstrong stepped on the moon, he became my hero. I think he became everyone's hero at that moment. So I knew that I would become a scientist, and that led to my training as an astronaut.

Ride: the first U.S. woman in space

Today, my company, Sally Ride Science, educates students about space exploration. They sometimes take it for granted. They never experienced all of the doubting that took place decades ago, before the moon landing finally happened. So now I tell the students to imagine a planet somewhere out there that may be very different from Earth, then imagine how thrilling it would be to land there in a rocket ship. That's when I see a sense of wonder in their eyes, the same magic that inspired me as a kid.

DEGRASSE TYSON: CHRIS CASSIDY; MCCAIN: BILEEN BLASS, USA TODAY; SCHIEFFER: JP FILO, CBS; ABDUL-JABBAR: JEMAL COUNTESS, WIREIMAGE; ARMSTRONG: BILL INGALLS, NASA; MOON: NASA



EXCLUSIVE: NEIL ARMSTRONG Q&A

In a rare interview, astronaut Neil Armstrong describes his historic moon landing on July 20, 1969.

Q: What chances did you think you had of pulling this landing off?
My feeling was that we had a 90% chance of returning safely to Earth, but only an even-money chance of successfully landing on the moon. We might not separate from the command module or might have to abort during the descent.

Q: Describe your emotions once you made the landing.
There were a few system details that we had to take care of immediately. Once we got through those, there was time to shake hands. We had made it. So far, so good. But there wasn't a lot of time for enjoying the moment. There were other things to do.

Q: You meant to say, "One small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind." But the first part came out without the "a." Why?
On flight tapes, I leave a lot of syllables out. I'm not particularly articulate. I think reasonable people will realize the "a" was intended. I hope history would grant me the leeway. They can put it in parentheses.

Q: Rather self-effacingly, you always have thought of what you said as a very simple statement.
I didn't think it was particularly important. But I knew other people might.

By James R. Hansen, Armstrong's official biographer. These previously unpublished comments were gathered for Hansen's book First Man: The Life of Neil A. Armstrong *(Simon and Schuster).*